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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001073

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: PODEMOS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEPUTY: TOO MUCH CHAVEZ

REF: A. CARACAS 000820
[1](#)B. CARACAS 001015

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. National Assembly (NA) Deputy Ricardo Gutierrez told PolCouns May 29 that his pro-Chavez party Podemos is interested in reopening a dialogue with Embassy officials. Gutierrez predicted that Podemos will weather President Chavez' condemnation for not joining the Venezuelan president's proposed United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and that recall efforts against two Podemos governors will fail. He criticized Chavez for trying to replicate Soviet and Cuban models of development and said he expected Chavez to delay making major changes to the 1999 Constitution until 2008. Gutierrez called ongoing student protests "worrisome" and said the BRV needed to establish a dialogue with opposition groups. The once loyal pro-Chavez Podemos now constitutes a small, but concentrated, fissure within Chavismo. End Summary.

Room for Renewed Dialogue

[1](#)2. (C) PolCouns and Poloff called on NA Deputy Ricardo Gutierrez May 29 in his National Assembly office. Gutierrez noted that he had consulted with Podemos Secretary General Ismael Garcia, and Garcia has authorized him to speak on his and the party's behalf. He also said the Podemos party is interested in a reopening a "frank" dialogue with Embassy officials. As former member of the inter-parliamentary "Boston Group," Gutierrez said he and other deputies are interested in reviving such contacts between the National Assembly and U.S. Congress. PolCouns reinforced USG interest in opening more channels of communication with BRV officials, noting that we should find ways to engage on issues of common interest, such as counternarcotics and counterterrorism cooperation.

Podemos' Political Future

[1](#)3. (C) While lamenting President Chavez' lambasting of Podemos for refusing to dissolve and join the new United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) unconditionally (Ref A), Gutierrez nevertheless expressed confidence that Podemos would persevere as a party. He criticized Chavez for trying

to create the PSUV "by decree, not discussion." While Podemos continues to support Chavez' "socialist revolution," the party will continue to insist that policy discussion be broadened beyond Chavez and his closest advisors. Podemos Secretary General Ismael Garcia urged the BRV on May 29 to

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open a dialogue with the four million opposition voters, noting that not all of them are "useless, oligarchs, or conspirators." Garcia chided the BRV to act with more "deliberation, balance, and respect."

14. (C) Asked about the prospects of recall referenda against Aragua Governor Didalco Bolivar and Sucre Governor Ramon Martinez (both of Podemos), Gutierrez predicted that June 16-18 signature drive would fail to get the required number of signatures to invoke the recall referendum. Gutierrez asserted that both governors are still popular in their home states. He also noted that Aragua and Sucre are small states in which few people would identify themselves publicly as "enemies" of the two Podemos governors. Gutierrez also expressed doubt that there would be very many recall referenda anywhere in Venezuela. He noted that the CNE-supervised signature drive process, including the cumbersome process of scanning fingerprints digitally, could not process enough signatures in the time allotted.

Differences with Chavez

15. (C) Gutierrez stressed that Podemos is not just opposed to the Venezuelan president's authoritarian style, but also has genuine policy differences with Chavez. He said he is opposed to Soviet or Cuban models of development that he argued Chavez is seeking to emulate because "they simply did not work." Gutierrez added that he speaks from experience as a former member of the Communist Party (PCV) who visited the Soviet Union and Cuba. Moreover, Gutierrez disagreed

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with Chavez' decision to expropriate CANTV, Venezuela's largest telecommunications firm, and the electricity sector. "If the private firms were doing a good job," Gutierrez asked, "why take them over?" He also criticized Chavez' efforts to centralize the delivery of social programs. "In the end," Gutierrez sighed, "its always all about Chavez."

Constitutional Changes

16. (C) Asked about Chavez' intention to seek major changes to the 1999 Constitution, Gutierrez said the drafting process is a "black box" and most National Assembly members, including him, have not yet been informed of the content of the proposed reforms. Nevertheless, Gutierrez said Chavez would not seek any changes until 2008 because he had already detected potential opposition to some of his ideas, including the elimination of term limits. Chavez' original goal was to get a package of constitutional changes approved via a referendum by the end of 2007. In addition, Chavez is already pursuing so many other radical political and economic changes and cannot focus his energy on reworking the Constitution, according to Gutierrez

Student Protests

17. (C) Gutierrez called ongoing student demonstrations protesting the BRV's May 28 closure of independent broadcaster RCTV "worrisome." He said the BRV needed to establish a dialogue with the opposition to calm tensions. The BRV's only other alternative, Gutierrez continued, is to "repress" the students and that would be politically

counterproductive. Addressing the National Assembly the same day, Podemos Secretary General Ismael Garcia "Enough of confrontations and mobilizations; I call for dialogue at this difficult time in the country."

Comment

18. (C) President Chavez' decision to pillory the small pro-Chavez parties that did not join the PSUV is opening real fissures within Chavismo, giving us renewed access to Patria Para Todos (Ref B) and Podemos leaders. That said, this access is somewhat devalued by the fact that it is which "schismatic" Chavistas, who have been expelled from Chavez' circle of trust. This has liberated the remaining party leaders of both pro-Chavez parties to be more critical of Chavez' authoritarian style of governance and policies, both in private and in public. Nevertheless, both parties face uphill battles to remain politically relevant while neither enjoying Chavez' favor nor joining the opposition.

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